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**U.S. EPA, MEMORANDUM FROM D. L. FORMAN, U.S. EPA REGION  
III, PHILADELPHIA, PA, SUBJECT: COBALT TOXICITY -  
(USED AS A REFERENCE IN OU 5 RI REPORT)**

03/18/92

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MEMORANDUM

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*Cobalt: oral RfD.*UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY  
REGION III841 CHESTER BUILDING  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19107

March 18, 1992

SUBJECT: Cobalt Toxicity

FROM: Peter L. Forman, Ph.D. *P. Forman*  
Senior Toxicologist, Technical Support Section (3HW15)

TO: Addressee

For your information, I have attached EPA's newest report regarding cobalt toxicity. They have given no oral RfD, instead they are recommending a range of acceptable daily intakes. See discussion on page 4.

Addressee:

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U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) 1992  
Memorandum from D.L. Forman, U.S. EPA Region III,  
Philadelphia, PA, Subject: Cobalt Toxicity, dated March 12, 1992.

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## Attachment 3

## Risk Assessment Issue Paper for:

## Provisional RfD for Cobalt (7440-48-4)

Cobalt has been found to stimulate the production of red blood cells in humans and, therefore, has been used as a treatment for anemia. In 12 anemic, anephric patients undergoing dialysis, treatment with 0.18 mg cobalt/kg/day as cobalt chloride for 12 weeks resulted in a significant rise in hemoglobin (Duckham and Lee, 1976). Taylor et al. (1977) reported similar effects in 8 anephric patients treated with 0.16-0.32 mg cobalt/kg/day as cobalt chloride for 12-32 weeks. In both studies, hemoglobin levels returned to pre-treatment levels following the cessation of treatment. Similar effects were reported in nonanemic humans and animals (Davis and Fields, 1958; Krasovskii and Fridlyand, 1971). Reversible polycythemia was reported in 6 normal male subjects following treatment with 1 mg cobalt/kg/day as cobalt chloride for 25 days (Davis and Fields, 1958). In normal rats, treatment with 0.5 mg cobalt/kg/day, but not 0.05 mg/kg/day, as cobalt chloride resulted in polycythemia and an increase in hemoglobin (Krasovskii and Fridlyand, 1971). An increase in hematocrit and hemoglobin levels was not observed, however, in pregnant women treated with 0.5-0.6 mg cobalt/kg/day for 90 days in an attempt to alleviate the anemia often found during pregnancy (Holly, 1955).

Much of the oral data in humans deals with the cardiomyopathy seen in people who drank large quantities of beer containing cobalt chloride (used to stabilize the foam) (Alexander, 1969, 1972; Morin et al., 1971). The people ingested 0.04-0.14 mg cobalt/kg/day (approximately 8-30 pints of beer daily) over a period of years (Alexander, 1969, 1972; Morin et al., 1971). The cardiomyopathy in the beer-drinkers, termed "beer-cobalt cardiomyopathy", was fatal to 43% of the subjects within several years, with approximately 18% of these deaths occurring within the first several days. The beer-cobalt cardiomyopathy appeared to be similar to alcoholic cardiomyopathy and beriberi, but the onset of the beer-cobalt cardiomyopathy was much more abrupt. The practice of adding cobalt to beer to stabilize the foam has been discontinued. It should be noted, however, that the cardiomyopathy may have also been due to the fact that the beer-drinkers had protein-poor diets and may have had prior cardiac and hepatic damage from alcohol abuse. Treatment of both pregnant and nonpregnant anemic patients with comparable or much higher doses of cobalt (0.09-1 mg cobalt/kg/day) did not result in effects on the heart (Duckham and Lee, 1976; Davis and Fields, 1958; Holly, 1955; Taylor et al., 1977).

Cobalt has been found to be a sensitizer in humans. Individuals are sensitized following dermal or inhalation exposure, but flares of dermatitis may be triggered following cobalt ingestion. One study was located that orally challenged cobalt-

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exposed workers in order to assess sensitization (Veien et al., 1987). In this study, several patients with eczema of the hands were challenged orally with 1 mg cobalt (0.014 mg cobalt/kg/day as cobalt sulfate) in tablet form once per week for 3 weeks and 28/47 patients had a flare of dermatitis following the oral challenge (Veien et al., 1987). Forty-seven patients had positive patch tests to cobalt (13 to cobalt alone and 34 to nickel and cobalt) and 7 of the 13 patients that patch tested positive to cobalt reacted to the oral challenge. Using both the oral challenge and dermal patch tests, it was determined that the cobalt allergy was systemically induced. The exposure levels associated with sensitization to cobalt following inhalation or dermal exposure were not established.

Interrelationships have been found to exist between cobalt and nickel sensitization (Bencko et al., 1983; Rystedt and Fisher, 1983; Veien et al., 1987). In guinea pigs, nickel and cobalt sensitization appear to be interrelated and mutually enhancing (Lammintausta et al., 1985). Therefore, it is possible that in people sensitized by nickel, exposure to cobalt may result in an allergic reaction. The elicitation of an allergic response in cobalt-sensitized workers was considered for the derivation of an oral RfD. An oral RfD was not derived because a NOAEL for the elicitation of the allergic response in humans was not defined and, because interrelationships exist between cobalt and nickel sensitization, people sensitized by nickel may have an allergic reaction following cobalt exposure. Consequently, it is impossible to certify that an RfD based on this effect would provide sufficient protection for sensitive individuals.

Three studies were located examining the developmental effects of orally administered cobalt (given as cobalt chloride) in rodents (Domingo et al., 1985; Paternain et al., 1988; Seidenberg et al., 1986). Domingo et al. (1985) treated pregnant female rats to 5.4 to 21.8 mg cobalt/kg/day from gestation day 14 through lactation day 21. Fetal effects included stunted growth of the pups at 5.4 mg cobalt/kg/day and decreased survival at 21.8 mg cobalt/kg/day. These effects occurred at levels that were maternally toxic (authors did not specify the effects), therefore, the effects may be a result of maternal toxicity and not cobalt treatment. No teratogenic effects were reported.

No significant effects on fetal growth or survival were found in rats exposed to 6.2 to 24.8 mg cobalt/kg/day during gestation days 6-15 (Paternain et al., 1988), although a nonsignificant increase in the incidence of stunted fetuses was found in the animals treated with 12.4 or 24.8 mg cobalt/kg/day. Maternal effects, however, including reduced body weight and food consumption and altered hematological parameters, were reported. No fetal effects were reported in mice exposed to 81.7 mg cobalt/kg/day during gestation days 8-12 (Seidenberg et al., 1986), but a significant decrease in maternal weight was found.

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Several studies reported testicular degeneration and atrophy in rats exposed to 5.7 to 30.2 mg cobalt/kg/day as cobalt chloride for 2-3 months in the diet or in the drinking water (Corrier et al., 1985; Domingo et al., 1984; Mollenhauer et al., 1985; Nation et al., 1983; Pedigo et al., 1988).

Given the database, the most sensitive indicators of cobalt toxicity following oral exposure are the increase in hemoglobin in both humans and animals, and the elicitation of dermatitis in sensitized individuals.

An alternative approach was likewise evaluated based on the hematological effects of cobalt treatment (increase in hemoglobin) in anemic dialysis patients (Duckham and Lee, 1976). The results of this study are supported by a similar study in anephric patients (Taylor et al., 1977). Hematological effects of cobalt were also found in studies in normal humans (Davis and Fields, 1958) and rats (Krasovskii and Fridlyand, 1971) indicating that the effect is not limited to anephric individuals. The data of Davis and Fields (1958) reported hemoglobin increase of 6-11 % over "normal" in "normal" volunteers given 0.96 mg cobalt/kg/day as cobaltous chloride. However, the data of Duckham and Lee (1976) describes a case of refractory anemia in patients with chronic renal failure that upon treatment with 0.18 mg cobalt/kg/day for 12 weeks responded favorably. The patients hemoglobin levels were increased to levels at or near low "normal" clinical levels from levels clinically described as anemic. The anemia recurred following cessation of treatment. Thus, this effect of cobalt administration in the Duckham and Lee (1976) study (and likewise that of Taylor et al., 1977) cannot be termed adverse, but are actually clinically beneficial to patients with renal disease. Consequently, these data cannot be used to derive an oral RfD.

The only known nutritional, but vital function of cobalt is as a cofactor of vitamin B<sub>12</sub>. In humans, vitamin B<sub>12</sub> is derived from bacterial synthesis and therefore, cobalt is essential for animal species, such as ruminants, that depend totally on their bacterial flora for vitamin B<sub>12</sub>. There is no evidence that the intake of cobalt is ever limiting in the human diet, and therefore no RDA is deemed necessary for cobalt (NRC, 1989). It should be noted that the average daily intake of cobalt in humans ranges from approximately 0.002-0.008 mg cobalt/kg/day in adults (0.16-0.58 mg cobalt/day ÷ 70 kg; Tipton et al., 1966; Schroeder et al., 1967) and 0.01-0.06 mg cobalt/kg/day in children (0.3-1.77 mg cobalt/day ÷ 28 kg; NRC, 1989; Murthy et al., 1971). Murthy et al. (1971) indicated that the children in this study ranged in age from 9-12 years. Using the average weight of 28 kg for children aged 7-10 years (NRC, 1989), the average daily intake for the children in this study ranged from 0.01-0.06 mg/kg/day. If the default adult weight of 70 kg is used with the Murthy data, then the range of intake would be from 0.004-0.025 mg/kg/day.

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The effects of chronic occupational exposure to cobalt on the respiratory system are well documented. Cobalt has been found to be the etiologic agent in hard metal disease. The observed effects include respiratory irritation, wheezing, asthma, pneumonia and fibrosis and have been found to occur at exposure levels ranging from 0.003 to 0.893 mg cobalt/m<sup>3</sup> over a period of 2-17 years (Davison et al., 1983; Demedts et al., 1984; Kusaka et al., 1986a,b; Raffn et al., 1988; Shirakawa et al., 1988; Sprince et al., 1988).

Studies have implicated cobalt as a sensitizer in humans. Although the minimum exposure level associated with cobalt sensitization has not been determined, work-related asthma was found in hard metal workers who were occupationally exposed (for greater than 3 years) to levels of cobalt ranging from 0.007 to 0.893 mg cobalt/m<sup>3</sup> (Shirakawa et al., 1988). Given the database, the most sensitive indicators of cobalt toxicity by inhalation exposure are the effects on the respiratory system in both humans and animals and allergic responses in cobalt-sensitized individuals.

The data described above does not identify a single study, animal or human, that could be used to properly derive an oral RfD. In unusual circumstances, i.e., excessive beer drinking or through occupational sensitization, cobalt has been shown to manifest toxicological symptomatology. However, these reports provide inadequate data on which to derive an RfD. Furthermore, use of inhalation data to derive an oral RfD is precluded due to portal of entry effects. It is apparent that the upper range of average intake for children (0.06 mg/kg/day) is below the levels of cobalt needed to induce polycythemia in both renally comprised patients (0.18 mg/kg/day) and normal patients (0.96 mg/kg/day).

Therefore, in lieu of an oral RfD for cobalt and given the ubiquitous nature of cobalt and the relatively well characterized intake of cobalt in food, it is recommended that the intake levels described above be used as guidance for oral exposure to cobalt.

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